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C O N F I D E N T I A L CHISINAU 000312

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/06/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [PINR](#) [MD](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR GETS POSITIVE RESPONSE FROM MINISTER OF JUSTICE ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

REFS: A. Chisinau 0248, B. 07 Chisinau 0955

Classified By: Ambassador Michael D. Kirby, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a March 19 meeting on religious freedom with the Minister of Justice, Ambassador Kirby received a positive response to our concerns, and promises that the Ministry would set up a roundtable with religious leaders and publish templates for registration procedures. Pirlog frequently criticized the less inclusive and less democratic aspects of Moldovan society and bureaucracy, and praised the effects of the Millennium Challenge Corporation's Threshold Country Program on the judiciary. End summary.

Reformist Justice Minister Says Law to be Even Better

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¶2. (C) Minister of Justice Vitalie Pirlog is young (born in 1974) and open to reforms. After a long string of Moldovan losses at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) concerning failure to execute judgments and violations of press freedom, he publicly criticized Moldovan courts for their faults, rather than rounding on the ECHR. Pirlog accepted the Ambassador's praise of the new religion law (Ref B) and its liberalization of access to public places and theoretical simplification of registration procedures. He noted that the law had generally promoted religious liberty against the opposition of those in society and government who were "not inclusive," and promised further amendments to bring it closer to Western norms.

¶3. (C) Responding to criticisms made to the Ambassador by religious leaders regarding difficulties in implementation of the law, Pirlog accepted that registration procedures, moved from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Justice under provisions of the law, were difficult. He cited the inexperience of his ministry in dealing with religious issues, the fact that the official in charge of registration was already in charge of registering NGOs and political organizations, and that some information had been lost in the transfer of files between the ministries. Pirlog promised, however, that one of his deputy ministers would convene a meeting of religious leaders to discuss their complaints, and that his ministry would publish guidelines and templates for registration and incorporation, as it had already done for NGOs. He also noted that his ministry was striving to make reasons for refusal of registration clear, and to assist those who were refused to reapply.

¶4. (C) Pirlog showed that he had been thinking about the issue: he noted that the Government of Moldova (GOM) had not thought through the special issues associated with religious organizations, which have in the past been slotted under the rubric of non-commercial organizations. He agreed that the GOM needed to acknowledge the Ambassador's distinction between hierarchical churches, such at the Orthodox and Roman Catholic, and the more horizontally-organized Protestant churches. Pirlog affirmed that all religions have a right to existence in Moldova, noting only that they should follow the law and respect the rights of their members.

¶ 15. (C) Pirlog also showed himself willing to respond to issues of residence and work permits for foreign religious workers, even though they fall under the competence of the Ministry of Interior. Told of a foreign Roman Catholic priest who had been threatened with expulsion because he was taking away jobs from Moldovans, he grimaced and said that the Ministry of Interior should set up a mechanism to eliminate such practices. (Note: the Roman Catholic Church hosts over 60 foreign priests and nuns to serve its 20,000 parishioners. Only three Moldovan citizens are ordained priests. End note.) Going further, he promised to set up a roundtable for all the ministries that are involved in residence and work permits, in order to push needed changes in "Soviet" mentality and behavior. Expanding on his comment, he noted his pleasure that Moldova now has an ethics code for judges, and will establish one for police. Pirlog stated that the publication of judicial decisions on the web, a reform instigated by Millennium Challenge Corporation's Threshold Country Program agreements, was already having a positive effect by educating judges.

¶ 16. (C) Comment: Throughout the conversation, Pirlog agreed that it was not in Moldova's interests for the Ambassador to have to act as the intermediary between religious leaders and the GOM, and accepted his responsibility to undertake the bureaucratic changes necessary to implement the reforms in the new law. We look forward to the roundtable of religious leaders convened under his ministry's aegis, as a first step in moving ecumenism out of the Ambassador's residence (Ref A) and into public spaces and the corridors of Moldovan power. However, given the resignation of the entire Moldovan government on March 19, it is not yet clear that Pirlog will be in a position to carry out his promises.

Kirby